

The Content and Discontents of Devolution

Measuring the “Devolution Performance” of
the Counties of Kenya

The Content of Devolution

- The Fourth Schedule of the Kenya Constitution (2010) devolves fourteen (14) functions of government to the Counties; they are, in brief:
- 1) Agriculture; 2) County health services; 3) Control of air and noise pollution, public nuisances; 4) Cultural activities; 5) County transport; 6) Animal control and welfare; 7) trade development and regulation, 8) County planning and development; 9) pre-primary education and village polytechnics; 10) soil, water conservation and forestry; 11) County public works: water and sanitation; 12) Fire fighting and disaster management; 13) Control of drugs and pornography; 14) public participation at the local level.

The Object(s) of Devolution Research

- Objects are things one does research about. They can be people or basketball teams or universities. For devolution, the object of our research is the Counties of Kenya.
- Another way of stating this would be: “The unit of analysis of our study is a County of Kenya.”
- The functions devolved to the Counties – agriculture, health, transport, etc. - represent categories or sub-objects of our research: County health services in Nyandarua County, transport in Migori County, water in Kilifi County, etc..

Properties and Variables of Research Objects

- The Counties –the object of our research- have a number of properties or attributes according to which they can be described: their size, population density, etc.
- These properties allow us to talk about the ways in which the Counties are alike and the ways in which they are different.
- In research terminology, a property that allows us to compare or make a distinction between two objects of study – for example, two Counties of Kenya - is called a variable.
- Hypotheses are all about the relationship of variables.

Research Variables and Their Values

- Properties, that is, variables, have sets of values that differentiate one object from another object (or objects), either in kind or according to a range (or scale) of values from lowest to the highest.
- So, for example, the variable of “total population” allows us to compare Rift Valley Province whose total population was 10,006,805 (Kenya Census 2009) with Northeastern Province whose total population was 2,310,757.

The Properties (Variables) of Counties

- To measure the “devolution performance” of the Counties of Kenya comprehensively, we would need to assess the “properties” related to each of the categories or sectors, that is, to all fourteen (14) devolved functions.
- This is more complicated than it might seem. Each of the fourteen (14) devolved functions has several sub-functions; for example, the function of County Transport includes seven (7) sub-functions: county roads, street lighting, traffic, parking, public road transport, ferries and harbours.

Researching only one Devolved Function

- What would be involved, were we to restrict our research to only one of the fourteen (14) devolved functions of a County?
- Even researching only one devolved function, for example, Agriculture, is a major undertaking in its own right.
- If we look at the devolved function of Agriculture we find it is disaggregated into five (5) subsidiary functions.

The Subsidiary Agriculture Functions

The subsidiary functions of Agriculture are:

- 1) crop and animal husbandry;
- 2) livestock sale yards;
- 3) county abattoirs;
- 4) plant and animal disease control;
- 5) fisheries.
- As can be seen, two of these sub-functions, nos. 1) and 4), each have two functions, making a total of seven (7) “subsidiary functions” in the Agriculture sector.

The Complexity of County Function Variables

- An analysis of all fourteen (14) devolved functions and their sub-functions shows that we are dealing with an overall total of some eighty-three (83) distinct categories of devolved functions and sub-functions.
- Thus, in order to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the “devolution performance” of counties, one would have to prioritize and assign metrics to these eighty-three (83) categories, and then devise questionnaires and metrics to measure their properties (variables) and the relationship of these variables to each other.

The Complexity of Measuring Devolution

- Our analysis of the properties of “devolution” reveals the complexity of measuring and assessing the “devolution performance” of Counties;
- Why then do we find so many ready conclusions that devolution is either succeeding or failing?
- More often than not, devolution is being assessed, not through a research prism – as we have seen, this prism is quite complex and difficult to implement-, but through the prism of the vested interests of the political economy (politics and economics).

Intuition versus Rationality (Research)

- Another reason for ready conclusions about devolution comes from the work of Nobel-prize winning author Daniel Kahneman, best known for his 2011 book “Thinking, Fast and Slow”.
- On the basis of empirical research Kahneman reaches the conclusion that people tend to make intuitive judgments and emotional decisions even about deeply important topics.
- Yes, we are rational beings, he concludes, but our minds are essentially lazy and only work hard when they have to.